



THE LOST PROVINCES.

How Vansittart Came Back to France.

By Louis Tracy.

(Copyright, 1898, by Louis Tracy.) CHAPTER XXV.

Marie Acts. As early as 4 o'clock, after a brief sleep, Vansittart was awake and up. Thenceforward, as the hours passed, he was all anxiety, awaiting two things: First, news from the front of movements on the German side preparatory to the anticipated attack; and, second, the return of the chassours from Clermont.

But the hours of suspense passed—6 o'clock came, 7—and nothing happened.

At 7 Marie was in the arms of Armand, having traveled the greater part of the night. From the station he took her to the Chateau d'Or.

Her first exclamation was this: "But, O, Armand—is she here? Have you got her?"

"Mrs. Vansittart?"

"Yes."

"We have found out where she is, but we have not got her."

"And where is she?"

"At a vineyard near a place called Clermont."

"How do you know? You have not seen her?"

"Yes, Marie, I have seen her."

"Poor thing! She is awfully ill. One saw it already weeks ago. Does she bear it well?"

"To me her face seemed almost like the face of a dying woman, Marie."

"Oh! shrieked Marie, burying her face, pierced with pity. "How gentle, how good she is! And to be treated so!"

"It is hard on poor Vansittart, certainly."

"I pity her. Who is it, really, who has done it, Armand?"

"O, the Emperor Wilhelm, no doubt."

"Well—I can't, I can't think that!" she said, frowning with thought.

"Why not, birdie?"

"Could any gentleman do such a thing?"

"No—but then he is not a gentleman."

"What! aren't all kings gentlemen?"

"Not by any manner of means."

"Well, I can't understand it."

"That is the fact, pretty."

"He has such a noble face!"

"Who, Wilhelm?"

"Yes."

"He did not do this wickedness with his face, he did it with his merciless heart and brain."

"Suppose—I only say suppose, Armand—that all the time he knows not one word of the matter?"

Armand was seeing with his eye, which is reason; Marie, with that deep, inner eye, which is instinct. The wisest man is foolish in comparison with a woman who sees with her soul.

"Suppose," she said, after a silence, "that you went to him and told him the whole truth?"

"That who went to whom?"

"That you went to Wilhelm."

"All right, I can see that you are tired of me. You want me to go and get hanged."

"O! Would he hang you, then?"

"He would."

"What a wretch!"

"But there is no need. In an hour's time you will see Mrs. Vansittart here. Vansittart has sent a troop of chassours to fetch her."

So Marie was comforted, and waited. But in an hour's time Evelyn did not come, and the troop of chassours did not come.

At 10 o'clock they had not arrived.

For Vansittart the waiting was killing. He hid himself away where no eye could watch his now craven and demoralized despair.

At 11:30 half-a-dozen of the chassours of the expedition, with Follet and Montsalvo among them, arrived with blackened clothes and scorched faces. They had a tale of piteous defeat to tell.

While it was yet dark they had surrounded the farm house, secretly, as they thought. Then, finding every aperture closed, they had set to work to pick the lock of the front door. The operation, however, was neither noiseless nor very speedy, and, while it was in progress, they must have been heard from within. Finally they broke in a body into the house, only six or seven of the troops remaining without as a guard. When they entered the house they found within it not a single living being.

As they searched the cellars in wonder the building, and they might say, in a fearful explosion. Most of the chassours inside and surrounding the house had been scorched and two killed. Follet had then posted to Clermont for the gendarmerie, with the idea of bombarding the cellars, and it was the bombardment of the cellars which had retarded the return of the remaining chassours to Gravelotte. But they found the cellars empty. The Germans had escaped under cover of the dense darkness, presumably by distant egresses, taking their prisoner with them.

Such was the tale of defeat and disaster which Follet had to tell. He had come in person to tell it, undertaking the bitter task as a self-imposed punishment for his failure.

everybody, even her god-like Armand, was at a loss what next to do, she slipped away from him, ascended to her room, put on a dainty little Parisian bonnet and her gloves, and by a back stair, stealthily, went down into the garden of the inn, thence into the village street, and at the end of it asked some one this strange query: What was the way to Metz?

The way was pointed out to her, and she took it without any idea of the difficulties and dangers she would have to surmount that day before reaching her destination. There were the French lines—there were the German lines; these had to be passed. At the first she met with jests, and escaped contact. At the second she was roughly kissed several times on the mouth by a sentinel and then ordered back on the road she had come.

But with every defeat the wild fluttering at her heart with which she had set out lessened. Her will congealed within her. She escaped from the hands of the sentinel, weeping no longer with fear, but with rage. At every step she grew bolder.

She made a wide detour and crossed the Moselle. By the eastward gate, through which the market people of Lorraine streamed to bring their produce to the city, she entered Metz. But instead of the five miles from Gravelotte, which she had thought to travel, she had traveled fifteen.

She was faint now, and pale, and very weary. It was late in the afternoon. Her eyes had in them the wisdom of the world.

Her object was to speak personally, face to face, with the emperor of the Germans. Several times, now, she stopped dead, appalled by the bigness of the enterprise. She remembered the difficulties she had encountered, and she wished to speak to Mr. Vansittart. And this was an emperor. If she had run with the footmen and they had wearied her, how could she contend with horses?

To her immense surprise and joy destiny ordered it that she found not the least difficulty in speaking with Wilhelm. She had asked the way to the Hotel de Villa, and as she came to it there was Wilhelm just descending the marble stairway outside the entrance portal, surrounded by officers. A moment and Marie's heart gave one tremendous bound; the next she had darted nimbly up two steps, pressed through the throng of men and, hardly recognizing her own voice, was speaking:

"I wish to speak to your majesty. Pray, pray!"

She fell on her knees before Wilhelm. At once a favorable omen came from the emperor—he answered her in French.

"Well, now, what is all this, mademoiselle?"

"I want to speak to you, sir."

"Well, you have invaded my presence, willy-nilly. Speak, mademoiselle."

"Your majesty! Mrs. Vansittart is dying! She is very ill!"

Wilhelm turned as white as a corpse. Then flushing into scarlet wrath:

"Here, drag this wench from my presence; you men! How dare you let her come to annoy me?"

Marie sprang upright. Several hands caught at her shoulders, pulling her backward.

"I will speak!" she cried. "O, it is a shame—Mrs. Vansittart—"

"Be silent, you!" exclaimed Wilhelm.

"I am going to die!" shrieked Marie, at the same time throwing herself bodily down on the steps like an obstinate child.

"I thought you did not know about it. I took you for a gentleman—and I came to tell you that it was your man—a man called Rittersburg M. Follet says—who carried her off—O, let me go—will you?"

Now it was out—Wilhelm had heard it—chapter and verse. He had been able to guard his ears from an army, but not from the shrillness of a woman's tongue. His right hand dropped with a gesture of abandonment.

"Unhand her!" he cried out. "Leave the wench alone with me. Now, woman, speak your full!"

Marie, speaking in sobs from behind her handkerchief, began to pour out her tale.

"I thought—your majesty didn't know—because my husband says no gentleman would have done it. And I thought—I'd come and tell you—it was a man called Rittersburg—so M. Follet, the detective says. And she is dying—so good—and sweet. And she is my friend—so good—and sweet. And I don't want your majesty knows, to judge from your face. And the men Mr. Vansittart sent to get her last night—have been blown up—and there isn't any hope at all—and Mrs. Vansittart will die—except your majesty—"

She stopped, choked with sobs, and Wilhelm stood looking at her and said nothing.

The next day, for certain, there was to be a battle; if only for that day the mind of Vansittart could have been kept in a state of paralysis; the fool of a girl should have waited at least a day—

"This was not quite what Wilhelm was thinking, but it was not remotely dissimilar from what he was feeling.

"Where are you from," he asked suddenly. "From Gravelotte, sir."

"Then you had better get back to Gravelotte as quickly as you can."

"And will you marry?"

"Be silent! Here, some of you see this young woman taken safely through the lines on the road to Gravelotte. You, Schlegel, find out at once where a man named Rittersburg is now and let me know by sundown."

CHAPTER XXVI.

"In the Emperor's Carriage."

Not a word did Marie speak of her expedition at Gravelotte; on her arrival there she fell faint into her husband's arms, but he thought her overcome by the fatigue of the journey, and he left her to the care of the nurses, as before. Only, late at night, she went out to the facts in his mind.

"Ah, I thought there was something up."

"These expeditions of yours, Marie—"

"I did it for the best," Armand.

"I know, birdie. But the very worst might have come from it. As it is, nothing is a rumour, my dear."

"Well, I suppose," said Marie, "though it is very strange—I don't know—he was not altogether unkind to me. At first he broke into a terrible rage. But afterward—"

And Armand! I saw him give such a side-glance at me, and then at my lips; it made me blush."

"H'm! He doesn't know who it is you belong to, evidently."

"I told him my husband said no gentleman would have done it; so that was one for him to swallow!"

"But the rumour! He didn't say anything! Didn't he even attempt to excuse himself in any way? Make any sort of promise?"

"No. Not a word. When I was going

to ask him, he said, 'Be silent!' with such a frown. He can frown, I can tell you. And such a mustache, with hard tags at the end! It is not a mustache, it is a weapon."

So, habbling together, they at last fell asleep, and Marie's last murmur was: "Poor Mrs. Vansittart!"

It was the intention of Armand to take her out of the neighborhood by early morning; for there was no doubt that either at dawn or sunrise some hostile movements would begin, and that long before midday the whole locality would be rolled in war.

But he had an intense curiosity to see at least the beginning of actual fighting and hung on in Gravelotte till the sun was high and the clouds pointed to S. At that late hour, however, there was still no sign of anything in the way of blows.

Vansittart was riding slowly about half a mile out of Gravelotte in company with some eight or ten persons. His eyes were hollow and his careworn face all faded, but with a certain toughness characteristic of him he stuck to his guns. In his heart, however, as he rode there was nothing else than black and blank despair. He was merely doing his duty. His life was in ruins about him.

Armand, wandering and loitering here with Marie before their departure, saw and approached him.

"What!" said Vansittart, assuming a woeful blitheness, "is this goodbye, then? And Mistress Marie is running from the fire and smoke? Well, good voyage. And thanks, thanks, endless thanks for your

around the man's neck was a rope, and on the black skull cap, which was of the shape worn by condemned criminals in Saxony, had been fastened a band of white paper bearing these words in red ink:

"To Mr. Vansittart, with the Emperor Wilhelm's compliments."

An hour later, after Wilhelm's messengers had been feasted, they returned. They took with them Rittersburg, and a letter from Vansittart—and a specimen of Armand's engine of fire. Vansittart, in the letter, declined to have Rittersburg, though he admitted that he should be glad to hear that he had been shot by the proper German military authorities.

Whilst these courtesies were being indulged in by the leaders, General Krenzsch was leading a host of 200,000 men from Diedenhofen across the Moselle. Within three hours the left flank of the French army was turned, and men were murmuring that Vansittart had betrayed France in order to secure the release of his wife.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A REVERIE.

When, late at night, Jerome awoke to find Evelyn bending over him, it was with difficulty he realized his surroundings. He thought at first they were back in their summer home in the Adirondacks, and gazed with wonder at the queer old-fashioned furniture of this village public house.

But Evelyn's sweet voice restored his wandering senses, and he sprang up to clasp her in his arms with an alertness

where his personal staff were wont to assemble, there was a forgotten sentry on duty.

The man was a chasseur of the Eighteenth, our old friend Pierre Laronde, whose promised promotion had been forgotten in the rush of events since the memorable ride of the Five Thousand. He presented arms when he recognized Vansittart in the gloom.

"Where are all the officers of the staff, soldier?" said the millionaire.

"Gone off to the picnic at La Chapelle, your excellency."

"Have they all gone?"

"Well, your excellency, General Le Breton was here until half an hour ago. I reminded him of my promised commission and he went, too."

"Why was your commission promised?"

"Because I cut the wires that night at Longny."

"Is your name Pierre Laronde?"

"It is, your excellency."

"I remember now."

He dashed into the house and hastily scribbled imperative commands to the respective brigadiers.

When these were dispatched he bethought himself of Daubisson and he wrote the following note:

Headquarters, Gravelotte, 10 p. m.—Delayed to hear of your success, but have good reason to believe that Krenzsch's march is a feint. The emperor will probably attack our front in force tonight. Come to me here with whole staff at once, but first send out orders for immediate concentration of all available troops on Mars La Tour. Leave corps of observation only to look after Krenzsch. Guns and cavalry must be massed ready to move with day-break. I have already dealt with brigades mentioned in your second dispatch. I look to you for implicit obedience, irrespective of any conditions that may have arisen since your last communication with me.

JEROME K. VANSITTART.

"Laronde," he said, "here is your first mission as captain of my staff. See that it is well performed."

Pierre Laronde required no second bidding. Daubisson was six miles away, with different country intervening, but within thirty minutes he was in possession of Vansittart's message.

Shortly before midnight Daubisson arrived. His unfeigned joy at Vansittart's reappearance on the active list dispelled the last shade of resentment in Jerome's mind at the apparent neglect shown to him by his associates.

Daubisson eagerly detailed the steps he had taken to fulfill Vansittart's orders, and concluded by saying:

"Perhaps we may have to attack Krenzsch tomorrow, after all."

Before the other could answer a sudden roar of musketry came through the still night air from the direction of Metz.

It was sharp and continuous, betokening a very lively affray at the French outposts. Even as they listened up the fighting area widened until the crackle of small arms spread through an extended section of the front.

Daubisson was as impulsive as he was brave. Tears came to his eyes as he realized the frightful nature of the error in which he was nearly involved. The whole of the magnificent army under his command. He came near to Jerome and said, in a voice deep with emotion:

"Monsieur, if you retain my services I shall perhaps learn something of generalship by the close of the war."

"General," cried Vansittart, "one cannot have all the virtues. Believe me, I depend wholly upon your splendid co-operation."

But if Daubisson's mistake had been seen in time, it still required to be rectified.

At several points the French front was rapidly driven in before reinforcements called for by the close of the war."

Three-quarters of a mile further north, where the French line was weaker, the German advance was rapid and unchecked.

The watchers in Gravelotte were able to discern the progress of this attack by the gradual approach of the sounds of combat.

Although several staff officers had been sent trying to bring up regiments from the rear, there was no appreciable pause in the enemy's advance.

Matters began to look serious about 1 o'clock.

At this moment Pierre Laronde growled to himself:

"I must back my luck even if I get scolded."

He came to Vansittart and said:

"I think, sir, I could lead a couple of squadrons of chassours across country and

take the Germans in flank if you will permit me."

"Very well. Try it, captain."

"Major, sir, if you please, General Daubisson gave me a step for bringing your dispatch."

"Well? I agree with him. If you dispart that column you return a colonel."

Montsalvo found the troops for Laronde, and they clanked off along a lane. But they soon quitted the high road and made for a tree-crowned hill beyond which the conflict raged.

Laronde knew quite well that with 200 sabers he could do little against a compact German division of 8,000 or 10,000 infantry. He counted wholly upon surprising the enemy and creating a panic, thus giving the French infantry a chance to rush the Germans at the point of the bayonet.

Pierre's lucky star was certainly in the ascendant that night. He and his comrades came upon the second German brigade at the moment it was deploying to support the fighting line. Some farm buildings gave the chassours splendid cover until they were right in the midst of the Prussian ranks, and in a few seconds the orderly and compact mass became a torrent of disorganized humanity, fleeing in abject terror before the furious charge made by the chassours.

Fighting by night is an eerie and ticklish business at the best. The awesome effect of the mounted arm is magnified when the maddest horses thunder from out the darkness. Nor had Laronde forgotten to send a trooper to the commander of the expected charge, so that he might take advantage of it if successful.

In fifteen minutes one at least of the German columns was shattered into atoms, its officers and men urged in hopeless rout, its leaders stamped by their own troops, and its fragments rushing wildly to Metz for safety.

So Pierre got his colonelcy with comparative ease, though none marveled at his good fortune more than he did himself.

The struggle went on through the night with no very certain results.

Three of the eight columns launched by the Kaiser made good their lodgment on the left bank of the Moselle—those operating on the north, where they were supported by Krenzsch's strong corps.

When day broke the French left and center had been swung back, with the result that the French line now formed a crescent, of which the left rested near Verdun on the Meuse, the center lay at Gravelotte and the right touched the Moselle six miles south of Metz.

Clanking to and fro over the stone floor of a room in the Hotel de Ville at Metz, the emperor of Germany listened attentively to the statements made to him by various members of his staff.

The dogged persistence of Krenzsch's division in reaching and holding La Chapelle, followed by the rapid march of the German columns to the new front on the Meuse, constituted the first real German success of the war.

"A man without, your majesty, who says his name is Hans Schwartz, asks audience of your majesty. He says he is in possession of most important intelligence affecting your majesty's interests vitally."

The emperor paused in his walk. "Show him in," he said.

In a moment Hans Schwartz, pallid, unkempt, but confident as ever in demeanor, entered.

"Well, you rascal, what is it?" The emperor's tone was such that few men would have dared to face him bold.

But Hans Schwartz, who had been pale and shivering, shattered with the collapse of his projects, was in desperate plight.

"I have news for your majesty's ear alone," he said, glancing defiantly around at the officers scattered through the apartment.

"Of what nature?"

"I am Hans Schwartz, who helped Rittersburg to capture Madame Vansittart. I—"

"You villain! Seize him, some one, and have him shot at daybreak with his associate."

Several officers sprang forward, but Schwartz stood his ground.

"I can enable you to conquer France fairly in the open field within a week. Can you not listen to me? You can always have me shot at your pleasure!"

The man's determined attitude, his contempt for danger, and the earnestness of his tone impressed the Kaiser if they did not convince him.

"Quite true," he said, with a sarcastic smile. "Leave me with this fellow, gentlemen, and have a guard in readiness to march him off."

General von Gossler protested. There will be danger to the imperial person. Though the emperor laughed at the idea, the chief of the staff carefully searched Schwartz for concealed weapons before he was satisfied. Then he left the two alone.

"I have kept up communication with Paris by means of my pigeons," said Schwartz, "and even when the Prussian police seized the house where some German friends were established, they did not discover that my birds were trained in two sections, to fly to and from two places in Paris to my house near Gravelotte."

"I was wounded in a scuffle at this house, captured, held prisoner for some days, and escaped during the excitement following Mme. Vansittart's arrival at Gravelotte, and the attack by our majesty's troops. I hid all night and today in the wood on my farm and tonight visited my forgotten birds. One of them had a message written in a cipher which I alone understand."

"Ha!" Wilhelm was obviously interested.

"It contains news which all the world will know in three days, but which may be worth much, considering that I have asked for your majesty at this moment."

"Let us have it, then."

"An absolutely overwhelming communist movement has been organized. Within three days, perhaps sooner, there will be a general rising; the city will be sacked, the king and queen driven from Paris, if not killed, and a republican government proclaimed, with leaders anxious and ready to make peace with you on very favorable terms."

"Can you prove this?"

"Beyond a shadow of doubt. Here is the cipher. I will explain it to you."

Schwartz produced a scrap of flimsy paper and read a message, which his explanation to the emperor was an accurate summary.

"But how am I to know that this is reliable? Who are your authorities for the statements made? They are almost incredible without some substantiation."

"I am faint," said Schwartz, sinking into a chair. "Give me some wine and a morsel of food and I will tell you everything. My wound has weakened me, and the difficulty of crossing the French lines has quite exhausted me."

So, after a few minutes of ordering him to be shot, the emperor was waiting on Schwartz, and helping him to such eatables as were in the room.

Whilst the spy ate and drank he talked, and the emperor listened.

Half an hour did the wondering staff remain in the anteroom before the Kaiser called them in, and there was an eagerness in his manner, a settled purpose in his words, that had long been absent from the imperial methods and utterances.

"With our present troops between here and Verdun we can keep the French fast

in their new position," he said to Von Gossler.

"O, yes, I am sure of that."

"Good. We have 150,000 reservists gathered at Diedenhofen?"

"Yes."

"They are now all mobilized, and completely equipped for the field?"

"Fully. They are under orders to march tomorrow at daybreak."

"Then send additional instructions that they are to take the shortest route to Paris."

"To Paris, your majesty?"

"Yes, I said Paris, not Berlin."

"Who will lead them?"

"I, myself. I will issue a proclamation from the French capital within a fortnight, as my march will be positively unopposed. But above all else, you and Krenzsch must hold Vansittart fast on this bank of the Meuse. If he retreats, attack him. Do not leave him night or day. It is matterless what happens so long as he is unable to bring a large body of troops to Paris before I do."

Wilhelm had got his opportunity, and he was not slow to take it.